



JULIE LASSA

STATE SENATOR

SENATE BILL 233 TESTIMONY

Special Olympics Wisconsin Income Tax Checkoff

Committee on Health

Tuesday, August 18, 2009

Chairperson Erpenbach and fellow committee members - thank you for scheduling Senate Bill 233 for today's hearing.

Senate Bill 233 is a simple piece of legislation that would create an income tax checkoff for Special Olympics Wisconsin.

Currently, there are seven other income tax checkoff programs in Wisconsin. A "checkoff" allows taxpayers to designate a contribution to state programs on a personal income tax form, should they so choose. Since 1972, eight states have instituted checkoff programs to fund state Special Olympic committees.

During my tenure in the Legislature, I have had the privilege to watch Wisconsin Special Olympic athletes and volunteers compete in a variety of sporting events during the Summer Games in Stevens Point. With 10,000 athletes and 17,000 volunteers contributing each year, this organization provides many opportunities to both Special Olympics athletes and their communities.

The money from the checkoff will be used to expand the Healthy Athlete program that provides basic health care screenings and testing to athletes at no cost. This program includes health screenings, education on proper dental hygiene, the importance of a healthy diet, prescription glasses and custom-fit mouth guards for soccer athletes. Revenue generated will allow Special Olympics to increase the number of athletes they can serve in this program.

I urge you to support Senate Bill 233 so that Special Olympics Wisconsin can continue to serve its dedicated athletes and volunteers.

Thank you.



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TO: Senator Jon Erpenbach, Chair and members of the Committee on Health, Health Insurance, Privacy, Property Tax Relief and Revenue

FROM: Dennis Alldridge, President, Special Olympics Wisconsin

DATE: August 18, 2009

RE: Support Senate Bill 223 creating individual income tax check-off for Special Olympics Wisconsin

Thank you Chairperson Erpenbach and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 223 today. Also, a special thank you to Senator Julie Lassa for her ongoing leadership to pass an income tax check-off bill that could benefit thousands of cognitively disabled children and adults in Wisconsin. A special thank you as well to Senators Lehman, Sullivan and Kedzie for their co-sponsorship of this legislation. With the funds we anticipate would be generated by passage of this legislation, we will expand our services to even more individuals with cognitive disabilities in Wisconsin.

My name is Dennis Alldridge and it has been my pleasure to serve as President of Special Olympics Wisconsin for the last 20 years. Special Olympics Wisconsin is the largest year-round sports program for individuals with cognitive disabilities in the state. We serve nearly 10,000 athletes from age eight through adulthood.

Many of you are familiar with all the good that Special Olympics does here in Wisconsin, across the country and worldwide. Eunice Kennedy Shriver had a vision. Let the world focus on what individuals with cognitive disabilities *can* do, not what they *can't* do. She started Special Olympics in 1968 with the first Games at Soldier Field in Chicago. What started as just a track & field meet has now evolved into a worldwide movement, serving more than three million athletes in the United States and 180 other nations.

Special Olympics Wisconsin was incorporated in 1972. We serve nearly 10,000 athletes in almost every county in the state. We are truly grassroots. 189 local programs in communities throughout Wisconsin provide the foundation for sports training and competition opportunities for our athletes. These local training programs are managed by volunteers, the backbone of our organization. In fact, the statewide staff for Special Olympics is quite small. We employ just 33 staff members. Our staff manages about 14,500 volunteers conducting more than 79 competitions year-round. Nearly 350,000 volunteer hours are spent each year helping our athletes in training and competition programs. If we had to pay for their time, it would cost us millions of dollars for all the services they provide to our athletes.

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Created by the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation. Authorized and Accredited by Special Olympics, Inc., for the Benefit of Persons with Cognitive Disabilities.

But we are more than just sports, and this is where this new funding will make a huge impact on the state of Wisconsin. In the last few years Special Olympics Wisconsin has become a leader in efforts to improve the health of people with cognitive disabilities. Approximately sixty-seven percent of our athletes currently are on some kind of public assistance, Special Olympics Wisconsin believes additional funds can go along way to prevent unhealthy lifestyle choices.

Some statistics about the population we serve:

- One third of Special Olympics athletes cannot see well and need new or different glasses. Six percent have serious untreated eye diseases.
- More than thirty percent of Special Olympics athletes fail a hearing test, six times the rate of the general population.
- Thirty-five percent of Special Olympics athletes have obvious tooth decay in their molar teeth and up to fifty percent have obvious gum infections; twelve percent report being in pain at the time of the exam and fifteen percent require urgent care.
- Half of all Special Olympics athletes have one or more preventable or treatable foot conditions.
- People with cognitive disabilities have a forty percent greater risk of preventable secondary health conditions than the general population.
- Two thirds of Special Olympics athletes struggle with issues of obesity and diabetes.

As the largest amateur sports program in Wisconsin for people with cognitive disabilities this creates a problem. We know athletes cannot reach their peak performance with these types of health issues. So we are doing something about it. In 2000 we started a program called Healthy Athletes. The Healthy Athletes initiative was developed to improve each athlete's ability to train and compete in Special Olympics. This program has grown and evolved and we are providing important health and wellness initiatives to our athletes.

In 2008 thru the Healthy Athletes initiative:

- Special Olympics Wisconsin provided services to include dental screenings, vision screenings and prescription glasses distributed as well as range of motion, strength and flexibility testing, screening for foot and ankle deformities and this year a new program called MedFest which provides sports physicals required for participation in Special Olympics events.
- 230 healthcare professionals such as dentists, hygienists, optometrists, ophthalmologists, physical therapists, podiatrists and medical doctors DONATED their services, valued at \$34,000.
- 1772 athletes were screened, more than 17 percent of the athletes we serve. With additional funds we could expand this program and reach so many more.
- The value of these exams and products (sports prescription glasses, mouth guards, etc.) they provided if athletes were to have to pay for them . . . TOTAL \$499,200.

And these numbers are just from three events in 2008.

We think this is good, we think this is valuable and we think this needs to be expanded. With the funds that we believe will be generated by this income tax check-off legislation, we want to expand the number of lives we can touch. We know for example that for every dollar invested into the Healthy Athletes program, four dollars worth of health serves are delivered.

The mission of Special Olympics Wisconsin is to "help our athletes develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community." Special Olympics has evolved over the past 40 years from just "nice" to "important" – important to the lives of these 10,000 athletes and their families all across Wisconsin each and every day.

Special Olympics Wisconsin would like to expand the number of athletes who can take advantage of the many opportunities offered through our statewide organization and expand the number of athletes who can participate in the Healthy Athletes program. And by doing this we improve the lives of our athletes.

With support from members of this committee, we believe SB 223 will help us achieve this goal and we urge you to vote "yes." Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.